

The Storyteller

THE RATING OF MISS BOND

The current belief in Belford's innermost circle that Miss Bond was a good woman was shared by Miss Bond herself. Not that she ever said she was good; on the contrary, she called herself a great sinner, and would expatiate at length to a patient listener on her faults, which somehow, in her narration of them, were made to appear as virtues in disguise. Father Cudahy, her pastor, may have doubted her qualifications for immediate canonisation, but he carefully kept his doubts to himself. The rapid succession of servants who served her for periods more or less short were not diffident. They said there was no standing her temper, and spoke of her economies with contempt and with allusions to misers and their habits.

When Miss Bond heard how her character was aspersed, she did not fly into a passion. All she did was to sigh and say that she knew her faults, and that stinginess and temper were not among them. If anything, she was too meek and patient; and, though not a spendthrift, her heart was open to give.

One servant had remained with her ten years, and great renown she gave her mistress. The women of her set said it was perfectly lovely in dear Miss Bond to put up with Margaret Callahan. Margaret was so stupid. She never did seem to learn, and the mistakes she made were enough to try the patience of a saint. 'But, then, Elizabeth Bond is a saint, if ever there was one.'

On a certain Wednesday, the eve of the Ascension, Miss Bond was instructing Margaret in duties appertaining to a luncheon she was about to give, and that was to eclipse anything of the kind ever before given in Belford.

'You will bring the dishes to the door only. Luella will hand them round. Under no circumstances are you to enter the room,' she said, promptly.

'And what, ma'am, if you're pleased to tell me, is a green and white luncheon?' asked Margaret, with visions of dear knows what in her mind. For she was very patriotic; and, having nothing else to give, gave her quota of prayers to the 'cherished country.'

Miss Bond's countenance assumed a look that forebode trouble.

'I wish you would pay attention, Margaret,' she reproved. 'You will bring nothing to Luella but what cook gives you to bring.'

'And if she be short of a knife or a fork—it might be a spoon—'

'Pshaw! I mean the eatables. You are to bring them in the order cook hands them to you. Do you understand?'

'Indeed I do, ma'am,' said Margaret, and shook her head wisely. 'And I remember now,' she continued, 'the knives and forks are in the cupboard by the sideboard—'

'And there's another thing,' hurried on Miss Bond, interrupting. 'Luella's hands will be full of things you ought to attend to.' (Margaret's countenance fell.) 'You will have to answer the bell. I give you credit for neatness, be your neatest on Monday.'

Margaret was all smiles now. With a courtesy she had learned at home, she exclaimed, with assured confidence.

'Trust me for that, ma'am!'

Miss Bond nodded her head, and adding, 'That's all for the present,' dismissed Margaret, and turned her attention to the writing-table before her, which was littered with note-paper of various sizes and divers tints.

'I should have a secretary. All these notes to write, my correspondence; and that upstart Synthe woman, whom I'll have to invite, has one!' she grumbled to herself as she rummaged through a heap of envelopes, pausing to extract one with a jerk.

'Father Cudahy's everlasting collections for the church,' she said, half aloud, and glanced over the printed matter on the envelope's face. 'We had one at Easter; does he think people have nothing else to do with their money but hand it over to him—'

A sharp knock at the door, its flying open suddenly, and the entrance of Luella with cap strings streaming, brought Miss Bond's soliloquy to an abrupt conclusion.

'I do wish, Luella, you would enter a room without creating a draught,' she ejaculated, testily.

Not noticing the reproach otherwise than by a sharpening of her chin, the girl handed her a letter.

'It's the dressmaker's bill,' she left it herself. This makes the third time she's left it,' said Luella, in a voice without sentiment, and nasally phonographic.

Miss Bond's face grew very red. 'Sure but very slow,' was what the people said of her payments.

'Do you know that you are very impertinent?' she said, slowly.

Luella's chin was lifted higher, and there was a warning in the meek tones of her reply.

'Indeed Miss I never knew it was an impertinence to speak the truth.'

Miss Bond would have liked to order the girl out of the house, but, the luncheon in view, she contented herself with ordering her out of the room.

Her voice slightly elevated, Luella retorted that she would gladly give up her place if Miss Bond would kindly pay her her wages.

'Why, Luella!' gasped the mistress.

'Why, Luella!' mimicked the girl. 'What you'd like to do is to box my ears; and I don't blame you for that, for you're thinking about your luncheon. But won't Margaret do for the green part of it? For, dear knows, she's green, stopping on here all these years, and for thanks nothing but nag, nag from morning to night, and every pinch of salt you use reckoned up and counted again' you. And it is mean keeping a lady waiting for a bill as you've kept Miss Haydon, and she a member of your Church—which I haven't a word to say again'; for that poor, patient Margaret of yours has made me most to love it. But I'd hate it if all Catholics were like you. And I'm sorry to have to speak so, but the truth's the truth. And I can't stand it longer—I cannot!'

Luella fairly screamed the last words, and then burst into a flood of tears.

Miss Bond sat upright in her chair, too stunned to speak. Gross rudeness she had received from servants, but never had she been so berated to her face. A close and nagging woman she was from habit and not from nature, but she was not a foolish woman. By no means did she believe the charges brought against her to be true to their full extent; but she did acknowledge to herself that she had been somewhat at fault. She remembered how civil and gentle Luella had been when first in her employ; how she had taken to going to Mass with Margaret, her gradual deterioration to insolence, her dropping of Mass altogether.

Luella was still sobbing when Miss Bond had composed herself to say, not without dignity:

'If you really wish to leave me I cannot keep you, but suppose you give me another trial? We both might do something to restrain ourselves. I am not thinking of the luncheon; I am thinking of Margaret, who, as you say, is a good woman. It is true, though, that you serve beautifully in the dining-room.'

Luella gazed at her mistress in astonishment.

'I thought all along, Miss, that I was not giving you satisfaction,' she stammered.

'You thought very wrong,' returned Miss Bond; and she was about to add that no one could complain justly of Luella's service, when it occurred to her that she herself had often found fault with it, and had never till to-day given it a word of commendation.

'Then, Miss,' said Luella, sheepishly, 'if you'll pardon my words, I'd be glad to stop; for indeed I'd be sorry to part with Margaret.'

The girl's speech struck her as unintentionally rude, and she was about to say so with considerable asperity, when Luella continued:

'I don't think, Miss, you know half the good there is in Margaret. She is slow in her ways and hard to learn; but, Miss, do you know where almost every penny of her wages goes?'

'No,' Miss Bond replied, 'I do not.'

'To her old mother in Boston; and she hasn't seen her since she's been here—not having the time or the money to pay her way, though it's a trifle of three dollars going and coming. Her mother is often very sick; and I've sometimes thought, Miss, the trouble of it, and not seeing her is what makes her seem stupid; though stupid she isn't about her religion, as I well know.'

Something like shame sent the color to Miss Bond's cheeks. She had never been gentle with Margaret, had considered herself a model of forbearance in keeping her in her employ, and now came this story of hidden sacrifice and a full knowledge that, after all was said that could be said to the contrary, the girl was a treasure in her household.

'I am glad you have told me this, Luella; and now that you have concluded to give me another trial,' she said, toying with the papers before her, 'I'll go on with my correspondence.'

'I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did, Miss; and if I had the chances you have, I'd go to confession for it,' said Luella, and she slipped noiselessly out of the room.

Confession! She had gone last Easter. She thought for a long while, and the end of her thoughts was to ask herself if she was not a wicked woman. And as she asked herself this question, her eyes fell on the envelope containing the dressmaker's bill. Mechanically she picked it up, mechanically she opened it. The bill she knew by heart, not so the pitiful letter that accompanied it—a letter in which many sores were exposed. If the well-to-do knew one-half the pain it causes the independent poor to expose their individual sores, surely they would feel sorry for them. Miss Haydon begged for what was her own; and to get it she felt herself obliged to tell of a brother maintained at the seminary mainly by the fruits of her toil, and of a grinding poverty at home.

Miss Bond folded the letter, carefully replaced it in its envelope, and locked it in a drawer of her writing-table. Then she took up the bill and went over its items, every one of which she had, to use a vulgar phrase, 'jewed down.' Not without a sigh—for people do not instantly overcome bad habits, least of all penurious people—she altered the sum total of the bill to the figure her awakened conscience told her it should be. This done, she wrote a short note, in which she said she had erred in her previous calculations, and that she would call in a day or so about some work she contemplated for Miss Haydon; and she hoped her delay in settling a very just claim would be overlooked. The note she enclosed, with the bill and its amount, in an envelope, and touched an electric button twice, that being Margaret's signal.

Margaret hurried to the room, her face smiling, her eyes red. Miss Bond had often noticed those red eyes